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**SCHOOLING, SELECTION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY OVER THE LAST 50 YEARS:  
AN EXPLORATION THROUGH STORIES OF LIFELONG LEARNING JOURNEYS.**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper explores the impact of selection by ability in schooling systems on individual lives. It draws on narratives collected with a group of 18 people (accessed through a local U3A group) who were at school in Britain in a period from the 1940s through to the 1960s. This period saw significant changes in society and to schooling following the 1944 Education Act and the so called tripartite school system which ensued. Drawing on Mills' (1959) concept of the 'sociological imagination' the 'personal troubles' of individuals are drawn together with the 'public issue' of a national schooling system that segregated children by ability. Analysis of the narratives reveals the selection tests based on ability (the 11+) to be a key fulcrum in all their lives. The paper contributes to ongoing debates about selection, equity and social justice in contemporary schooling systems.*

**Key words: selection, ability, sociological imagination, eleven plus, narratives**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the impact of selection by ability in schooling systems drawing on data from 18 people (accessed through a University of the Third Age, U3A group, in a city in South West England) who see themselves as lifelong learners. They were at school in Britain<sup>1</sup> in the period during or after the Second World War (1940s-1960s) which saw great social change, including significant changes to schooling following the 1944 Education Act; seen by many as a ‘watershed’ (Jones, 2016). Central and local governments took a generally positive stance towards progressive education considering one of the ways of delivering the increasing demand for democratic education (Mandler *et al*, 2018). However, changes to the schooling system with the intention of providing appropriate education for students with different aptitudes, led to a socially divisive schooling system, underpinned by the notion of selection by ability that continues to cast shadows over contemporary education policy as well on those educated during this period (see McCulloch, 1994; Simon, 1986).

The study reported here contributes to ongoing debates on selection in schooling by ability, equity and social justice (OECD, 2013; Gorard, 2016). Selection by ability is explored using a *sociological imagination* which: ‘enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise’ (Mills, 2000, p.6). Our engagement with lifelong learning stories highlights the ‘personal troubles’ (Mills, 2000, p.8) of those living and learning through a period of significant social and educational change. These stories offer links into considerations of the ‘public issue’ (Mills, 2000, p. 8) of a national schooling system that segregated children by ability.

We continue with a short introduction to the principles of Mills’ *Sociological Imagination*, followed by a brief resume of post-war state schooling in Britain. Detail on the

methodology used in the study is followed by presentation and discussion of the data and a brief conclusion.

## **2. SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION AND HISTORY**

Our study acknowledges the absolute importance of history in education and supports Simon's (1986) insistence on the use of history to inform contemporary policy, for we must not misrepresent the past in order to fabricate a present and a future (Barker, 2012).

Misrepresentation can happen consciously but also subconsciously, for example through the examination and reporting of history through particular sets of lenses that allow a particular, partial perspective (Haraway, 1988). An example of such a partial perspective in the context of our study, might be that of people who experienced the impact of the schooling system based on selection by ability following the 1944 Education Act and presented in contemporary arguments about the expansion of grammar schools in England (e.g. Coughlan, 2016; Morris and Perry, 2017) and elsewhere.

As indicated, the participants in our study were at school in Britain during the 1940's through to the 1960's. Writing at this time, in the United States, the sociologist Charles Wright Mills, along with many others, became disillusioned by the promises of social change following the Second World War. In publishing '*The Sociological Imagination*' (1959) he declared the end of the 'modern age' in that 'our basic definitions of society and self are being taken over by new realities' (Mills, 2000, p.166).

Mills insists that the *sociological imagination* necessitates an intersection of biography, history and society. It emphasised the relationship between biography and society and traced the links between 'personal troubles' and 'public issues'. He outlines three types of questions that need to be taken up in any serious social analysis; an assessment of the structure of the society being studied, an understanding of how this society is situated in human history, and finally, the

characteristics of individuals in this particular society at this time. Mills argues that by using these three general questions as a framework for analysis, we might gain insights into both the 'troubles of the individual' and the 'public issues of social structures', and the interrelationship between the two (Mills, 2000, p.8). In sum 'neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both' (Mills, 2000, p.1). In his analysis of the relationship between Mills' life and work, Brewer (2005) argues for a sociological attention to 'spaces of selfhood', the real and symbolic places within which people live and within which meanings are constructed. Brewer urges us to recognise that our interpretation of the connection between an individual's life and work (in its broadest sense) 'is facilitated by understanding the spaces in which they were enacted' (Brewer, 2005, p.666). This is relevant here not least in terms of the real life consequences of the particular ideological construction of selective education at a particular time, in a particular place.

### **3. CHANGES TO SECONDARY EDUCATION IN BRITAIN FROM 1940**

The post-war period in Britain was a time of significant social and political change which saw the establishment of a Welfare State and changes to the state education system. Pre-war, secondary education was a complex mix of state, church and privately funded secondary schools with access controlled by selection through ability; intellectual ability and the ability to pay. Wartime unity 'stirred the social conscience of the country' (Middleton and Weitzman, 1976, p.207) and it was in this climate that 'a passion for making social reconstruction plans seized the press, the politicians and the public' (ibid). There were growing demands for a fairer system, and the then government began to make plans for an ambitious programme of post-war social reconstruction in which education would play an important part.

The Education Act of 1944 heralded, amongst other things, universal secondary education, 2,500 new schools and the raising of the school leaving age to 16. Although the Act

made free secondary education available to all up to 15, it recommended no particular form of provision. The structure of the future system was developed from two influential government reports produced by government bodies. The Spens commission was tasked to envision a 'Secondary Education with Special Reference to Grammar Schools and Technical High Schools'. Their report of 1938, underpinned by the idea of fixed kinds of intelligence, identified three broad categories of children, with different types of minds, each requiring a particular type of education tailored to their aptitudes and intellectual capacities. The report proposed three kinds of secondary schools to suit different student aptitudes: grammar, modern and technical schools. 'Each type of secondary school will have its appropriate place in the national system with its educational task clearly in view' and where 'the establishment of parity between all types of secondary school is a fundamental requirement' (Spens, 1938, p.376).

A few years later, the Norwood commission was tasked 'to consider suggested changes in the Secondary School curriculum and the question of School Examinations in relation thereto' (Norwood, 1943, p. iv). Resonating with the Spens commission report, the Norwood committee argued that children could be divided into three groups: The academically-minded would be provided for in grammar schools; the scientifically-minded would go to technical schools; the rest to secondary modern schools (Gillard, 2008).

Norwood thus produced 'a veritable ideology of "tripartitism" to fit a projected organisation of secondary education which could effectively maintain the old hierarchical pattern' (Simon 1974, p.269). Spens's vision of parity was unrealised for many reasons. These include the ideological position of the architects of the system and practical issues such as the very small number of technical schools which led in effect to a bi-partite system (with the exception of several pioneering experiments with "comprehensive" education i.e. schools taking pupils of all ability levels (Medway and Kingwell, 2010); of grammar and secondary modern

schools. The former, unlike the latter, were well-funded and crucially gave access to external examination qualifications and by association, access to Higher Education. This is the sharpest reminder of the disparity between the two kinds of school (Brooks, 2008).

This selective school system required some kind of allocation mechanism. Selection in the schooling system prior to 1944 was based mainly, on competitive intelligence tests of various kinds. These were done as pupils transitioned from primary to secondary education and were used, not least, in the allocation of free grammar schools places. The proposal by Norwood to use intelligence tests like these in the new school system was supported by some (Burt, 1943) but considered unrealistic by others (Vernon, 1960).

There never was a common exam at age eleven; the former arrangement of locally based selection exams at the end of primary school became known as the eleven plus (11+). The substance and success rates of the exam varied considerably depending upon Local Education Authorities and the numbers of school places available. In Carmarthen, for example, there were grammar school places for 50% of the children, while in north-west Kent there were places for only 20% (Labour Party, 1951, p.7) and it was particularly unfair to girls, for whom the pass-mark was often higher than for boys because there were fewer girls' grammar schools.

Competition for grammar school places intensified under the commitment of secondary school education for all in the 1944 Education Act and 'allocation' through the qualifying exams and primary school teaching became focussed on the 11+. In some areas, children sat qualifying tests in their school to determine who went forward to sit the final examination, with head teachers 'wielding significant, if not total control, over who took the 11+, often basing this decision upon a perception of who was likely to pass. It was not uncommon for primary schools to start streaming pupils from the age of seven' in preparation (Mandler *et al*, 2018, np). Under the intensity of the competition for places at grammar schools, the 11+ allocation exam system

‘degenerated into pass or failure’ (Montgomery, 1965, p. 119); children either ‘passed’ and went to the grammar school or, for the vast majority, ‘failed’ and went to the secondary modern. To add intensity to this crucial moment in a child’s education journey, very little movement of students happened between the different kinds of schools and they became ‘an entire mental and emotional universe for its groupings, each of which as it were lived on different worlds, inhabiting different subjectivities’ (Jones, 2003, p.21).

The 11+ exams became (and remain where still used) a key gateway in the education system (Coldron *et al*, 2010). For example, Access to Higher Education (HE) in England, required Advanced (A level) qualifications which in return required external General Certificates of Education (GCE). Students would need to pass the 11+, attend grammar school and achieve GCEs in order to be able to access A’ levels. Thus, the 11+ operated as a gateway into HE and post-graduate professions.

Grammar schools, which accommodated approximately 25% of the secondary age population in the post-war period (Bolton, 2017; Hart *et al*, 2017) became associated with, amongst other things, discourses of social mobility and ‘escape stories’ of students from working-class backgrounds. Examples are described by Seabrook (1973) while at University with similar others, were telling their stories where they were all ‘picaresque heroes’ (ibid, p.262) of their own lives. Steedman (1986) recalls, in the post war period there was ‘a whole generation of escapees, occupying professional positions that allowed them to speak of their working class origins with authority’ (p. 15) and their partial perspective, through cultural representation; the narratives of escape found in working class novels, plays and films of the 1960s for example. In contemporary calls for the expansion of grammar schools in England, individual narratives based on positive personal experiences are heard again. Stories of working and lower middle-class students, their access to grammar school and the social mobility this



opportunity offered are told and retold (see for examples, Bennet, 2004; Davis, 2015; Reynolds, 2018)

The tripartite school system was intended to be an education system fit for the post-war period, however, once in place for a few years, concern about the socially divisive nature of the school system grew. Extensive research substantiated these concerns then (e.g. Halsey and Gardener, 1953) and continue to do so (e.g. Allen and Bartley, 2017; Coldron *et al*, 2010; Gorard and Siddiqui, 2018; Hart *et al*, 2017), in particular challenging the partial perspective of the social mobility arguments (Andrews and Hutchinson, 2016).

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

Our study was a narrative inquiry with older people focusing on journeys (physical and metaphorical) through education. Participants were recruited through an open invitation to a U3A group based in a city in South West England. U3A is a self-help organisation for people no longer in full-time employment providing educational, creative and leisure opportunities. U3A groups are learning cooperatives that draw upon the knowledge, experience and skills of their own members to organise and provide interest groups (<http://www.u3a.org.uk/u3a-movement.html>).

Participants were aged between 62 and 82. The majority were retired professionals. Many had retired to the South West. They all saw themselves as lifelong learners and understood this idea in a very broad sense. For example Kevin regularly attends Adult Education classes, Rachel recently attended a charity work leader course and Alan has regular piano lessons.

After reading details of the project and associated ethical protocol (informed by the British Education Research Association), 18 people opted in and they were invited to share stories of their own education journeys through one-to-one interviews with members of the

research team. Participants were given the same starter question, which focused on their first formal education experience (for the majority, primary school) but some had not ever attended school or other sites of formal education. The interviews were lightly structured with a general, linear approach to generating the narrative. Participants were encouraged, where necessary, to move through sites of education in a generally chronological way but this was not insisted upon. Some narratives became quite circular and iterative wandering around particular events and memories rather than from one time period to the next. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Pseudonyms were used and care was taken to edit any markers, geographical or otherwise, that could identify participants individually.

The 18 narratives were analysed using the three perspectives of the *sociological imagination* (Mills, 2000); a consideration of structure of the society of the time (Britain in the 1940's-1960's), how this society is situated historically, and the characteristics of individuals in this particular society at this time.

## **5. PRESENTING THE DATA**

A number of issues emerged from the personal stories in the narratives. In this paper we focus mainly on:

- The impact of the 11+ on schooling, access to HE and career opportunities.

And to a lesser extent on:

- The education and career opportunities open to men and women from different socio-economic groups through the life course.

Further discussion of our data can be found in Gristy and Johnson (2017).

***A Brief introduction to the Narrative Data:***

There were 18 participants, six men and 12 women. Some chose not to give their age so as far we are aware, the oldest was 82 and the youngest 62. Most went to state funded schools, some to privately funded schools and one was educated at home (Table 1). They had been at school in a range of places in Britain and some attended schools in more than one locality when parents moved for work. A few had grown up and been to school in the South West of England. Three participants were at school during the war period (1939-1945); Miranda and Jana were evacuated<sup>2</sup> so went onto school in their new locality. Despite different family backgrounds, growing up in different places, all participants were educated in Britain during a 20-year period, (1940's-1960's) so their schooling sits within the same national social and political context.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

### ***The 11+ as a Fulcrum in the Lifelong Education Journeys***

It is worth noting that the research team members who carried out the interviews and analysed the data were considerably younger than participants and had not been subject to school selection exams. Their own partial perspectives here will perhaps have had some part to play in interviews and analysis. What was most striking in the narrative data was that, without prompting of any kind, all 16 participants who had gone to primary schools talked about the selection exams at the end of primary school, the 11+. For some it was a brief mention, others talked in detail. The pivotal nature of the 11+ in the lives of the participants is evident in every narrative (apart from those of the two people who did not do the 11+).

The narratives cluster into four main groups.

Cluster 1 – Rachel, Bert, Barbara - who went to secondary modern schools;

Cluster 2 - Dennis, Nigel, Barry – who had a secondary education in technical school or college;

Cluster 3 - Brenda, Miranda, Tracey, Jasmine - who went to grammar schools, left school at 16 or 18 and went into work;

Cluster 4 - Alan, Janine, Kevin, Jemima, Doreen, Jana - who went to grammar schools and then onto HE;

Cluster 5 - Carl and Jane - who did not sit selection exams aged eleven.

***Talking about the secondary school allocation process.***

In every narrative (excepting Carl and Jane who were in privately funded schools and not involved in secondary school selection exams), participants made reference to the way they were allocated a secondary school; there was reference to sitting exams, being put into exam preparation classes and having meetings with parents and head teachers. As noted earlier, there was a great deal of variety in the way secondary school selection or ‘allocation’ processes operated. However, for our participants, we see the degeneration of this complexity (Montgomery, 1965) into the singularity of a ‘pass’ or ‘fail’. All participants involved in school selection processes, without exception, refer to ‘passing’ or ‘failing’ the 11+. Respecting this, we use these terms as they did. The most detail on the personal experiences of the selection process is seen in the narratives from cluster 1, those who went to secondary modern schools.

***Cluster 1- People who did not pass the 11+***

Rachel, Bert and Barbara all failed the 11+ and went to secondary modern schools. Rachel’s story is illustrative:

*I left school at the age of fifteen.*

*And what qualifications did you have?*

*Nothing at all, nothing because as I said it was the baby boomers and you were trained to, you know if you went to the grammar school then you could be a*

*teacher or a librarian and I didn't fancy that. I mean I was at the senior school, the highest echelon was being a secretary and I wasn't mad about that either, so I went, I took myself to evening classes and learnt to type, because I wasn't even deemed good enough at that school to go into the flipping secretarial....*

*I didn't go to a grammar school because I just failed the 11+. The class was so big they split it and they said that lot over there can do drawing or what they like, and that lot over there were taught how to pass the 11+, and being nosy even then I was ear wiggling in on what they were saying and I just failed the 11+ and they were absolutely gobsmacked, 'how did you do that?', I said well I was listening to what you were saying but it was obviously not meant to be.*

*... I worked in an office, I got myself a job in an office at the age of 15 and continued in sort of office work until I gave up to have children.*

Here we hear of the pre-selection of students by teachers into groups being prepared for the selection exams and those who were not. Excluded from the exam preparation group (but being present in the same classroom) was clearly an intense frustration for Rachel. She experienced a compounding of this first exclusion as she recalls being excluded again from the 'higher echelon' secretarial stream at the secondary modern. Barbara and Bert have similar stories to Rachel, centred on the frustrations of limited options at their secondary modern schools. Barbara left school and went straight into work 'as you did in those days'. She wanted to be a vet but did not have access to science lessons. She went from school into a secretarial job that she left when she had her first child. Bert was told he nearly 'made it through' the 11+ but not quite. He left his secondary modern school aged 13 and went to a technical college and on into an apprenticeship with a local firm, like his father.

The secondary modern route seems to have provided Barbara, Bert and Rachel with limited options to study and little in the way of academic qualifications. If we define social mobility as the ‘ability of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds to move up in the world’ (Crawford et al, 2011:6). Barbara, Bert and Rachel also appear to have had limited social mobility through their schooling, their lack of access to qualifications and limited range of subjects to study. It is certainly not the parity of educational opportunity that Norwood wrote of in 1943 as their opportunities were structured by lack of opportunity inherent within education policy at this time in Britain. We cannot know what they might have achieved if their ‘personal troubles’ had not been impacted by ‘public issues’ in this way (Mills 2000).

### ***Cluster 2- People who went to technical schools and colleges***

The importance of technical apprenticeships in this period (Spencer, 2005), particularly for men, is evident in Bert’s narrative (above) and in those of other men who went from technical or grammar schools into apprenticeships. Dennis recalls little of what happened in primary school but remembers clearly the 11+:

*I took the 11+ and I passed and went to a grammar school in L [place locators removed], which had just opened, virtually brand new, called TM Grammar School, and of course all my friends were going to the secondary modern because they hadn’t passed. I do remember this bit, I didn’t particularly want to go to grammar school because my friends went to secondary modern. My parents wouldn’t have any of that at all so I went.*

Dennis lived and went to school in a northern city that had a strong tradition of heavy manufacturing and associated opportunities for apprenticeships. He left school at 16 and saw himself and his peers as ‘valuable assets’. Speaking of his human capital on leaving school he says, ‘who is going to get the benefit of me?’ He adds that his parents did not expect him to

go to university, ‘the only question you had to ask yourself was who will I do my apprenticeship with?’ Dennis undertook an engineering apprenticeship and worked as an engineer until retirement. He studied at University later in life.

Nigel also left school at 16. He had been at a grammar school, where he had a mixed experience, and went to a local technical college to study A levels:

*That was a really nice experience actually because at the tech I was very unusual being a grammar school [student], whereas the system as it was then, if you went to the secondary modern school you were kind of written off really, so there were a number of pupils from secondary modern school, and they were so ....because they were quite academic and they were trapped in this secondary modern system, obviously before comprehensive...*

Nigel articulates some key ‘public issues’ that are recorded (implicitly and explicitly) across all other narratives; particularly here, the negative perception of secondary modern schools and students who were ‘kind of written off’. The restricted nature of the curriculum in these schools where students who were ‘quite academic’ and ‘so motivated’ were ‘trapped’ in the system (remember the frustrations of Rachel who felt she had ended up with limited options).

Barry’s narrative illustrates a number of key issues that emerge from this second cluster, including the status of secondary modern schools and the impact of physical and geographical segregation of children in communities:

*[I] went to the local grammar school, as did everyone really, there was either that or the local secondary modern... By the age of 10 or 11 I knew that. I was also a member of a youth organisation called the Boys’ Brigade, and most of my friends were in that and quite a lot were in my school as well.*

*I walked. I tended to be very lonely, I just wandered, again because I probably came from a slightly, my parents living in a council flat, most of the people at my school had their own, lived in houses which they had, so I was coming from a slightly different direction than they were; it was purely geographical, there wasn't any snobbery there so I never came across any of that but it was just purely that, but it wasn't a difficult walk.*

*And from my financial position staying on past sixteen, even the fact that I could stay on to sixteen was considered rare but I seem to be academic, so I took O levels.*

*I took four. Maths, chemistry, physics and biology; I should have taken English but my father had a row with the English teacher. Anyway so I left and believe it or not went to work on the railways.... So it was really difficult to get a job in those days, it was a bad time, and a friend of my sister's worked on the London Underground, he got me an apprenticeship where I had a day release to go to college.*

The opening statement illustrates a key finding. Barry passed his 11+ and says 'as did everyone really'. In reality only a small percentage of his cohort would have gone to a grammar schools but in his new world of secondary education, everyone had passed the 11+ and his partial perspective from this point, positions his conception of the world in a particular way. Here we see evidence of 'an entire mental and emotional universe' for Barry and his school friends, living in 'different worlds, inhabiting different subjectivities' (Jones, 2003, p.21). Barry's narrative, along with others who passed the 11+ and went to grammar schools, draws attention to the disparity and separation of the 'geography' of class. His 'personal trouble' of being a working-class boy who 'walked to school from a slightly different direction' than boys



from home-owning families that he went to grammar school with emerges in this narrative and links with the ‘public issue’ of schooling and social mobility.

The potential for grammar schools to be sites of social mobility is a familiar argument in contemporary discourse as it was in the past. Barry seems not to have benefited greatly in terms of social mobility from a grammar school education. He experienced a loneliness like the working class boys of Seaward’s books, being a ‘council flat’ boy in a school with middle-class others who lived in houses they owned. In the end, it is the ‘public issue’ of socio-economic inequity leading to the limited economic status of Barry’s family and the challenge of getting a job that leads Barry into paid work at 16 in an apprenticeship sourced through a family contact.

***Cluster 3-People who passed the 11+, went to grammar school and then into work***

As with Nigel and Barry, Jasmine, Brenda, Miranda, and Tracy left their grammar schools at 16. Brenda’s narrative illustrates a number of the key issues that arise in this cluster. These include most importantly, a significant difference in opportunities and experiences for boys/men and girls/women:

*So passing the 11+ I went to the Public Secondary School for Girls, studied commercial subjects there because I knew that I wasn’t going to go to university; for one thing I didn’t think I was clever enough because I have to work hard at what I do, I’m not one of these people that comes easy to, I really have to apply myself, I can’t just sort of have fun and it happens, do you know what I mean?.... I really have to put myself to it. And anyway so I knew I wasn’t going to go to university and I knew I wasn’t going to be a nurse, so that’s why I took the commercial course cos you can do commercial studies.*

*Shorthand and typing, a bit of bookkeeping, that’s basically what it was....*

So there was no certainty that a 'grammar school education' would lead to a 'professional career'. Arguably, having qualifications, these individuals had more options at the end of their secondary schooling. However, there are a number of participants for whom passing the 11+ did not result in 'professional careers'. For Brenda, Miranda, Tracy and Jasmine, family backgrounds and contexts meant they left school and went into work rather than into post-16 education and HE. The reasons given for having to leave school at 16 for these women included parents who did not consider their daughter suitable for post-16 study, father being out of work so the family was in need of another wage earner, moving house to improve the life chances of a disabled sibling and going to work to study for professional exams. Thus, any benefits from being grammar schooled were contingent with and modified by intersecting factors in an individual's lifeworld. Brenda perceives herself as 'not clever enough' to go on to do qualifications beyond 16. This same under-valuing of self is also clear from Tracy's narrative whose mother, 'got it in her mind that I wasn't very clever, she didn't really understand ... and she had two younger children' so she left school and went into work. Miranda had to leave her grammar school before completing A levels as 'my dad he'd had a lot of bad luck, lost his job and all sorts, so he said I couldn't stay on at school. So on my 17th birthday he took me out of school and then I went to work'. The 'personal troubles' of these young women are contingent with low expectations of women and girls and the limiting of aspirations of those students from families for whom a grammar school education was a new idea (Barker, 2004; Spencer, 2005). They talked of gender segregation in the classroom and in terms of choices and opportunities both at school and in terms of their future prospects. All these young women suggest they would like to have continued their education. Their 'personal troubles' are indicative of the public issues of class, gender and the socio-economic vulnerabilities of working families at the time (Marchbank and Letherby, 2014).

***Cluster 4-People who passed the 11+, went to a grammar school and onto HE***

Alan, Kevin, Janine, Jemima, Doreen, Jana, Carl all went on from grammar school (in Carl's case a private school) onto HE. All of them referred to their families as middle-class or 'reasonably well off'. Alan dropped out of University after a year and eventually became a librarian, Kevin and Carl became teachers, Doreen and Jana doctors, Jemima a social worker and Janine worked in IT.

Kevin's narrative echoes those of the others in this cluster and illustrates how the public issue of education and its role in social mobility and also social reproduction. We hear expectations and assumptions (implicit and explicit) that children from middle class and privileged backgrounds would be successful in education attend grammar schools (or private schools). We hear too of newly built grammar schools and the importance of grammar schools in supporting and promoting young women into HE and professional careers at the time.

Kevin went to his local primary school:

*It was quite competitive, I was one of five siblings so there was always, even at that age, an element of 'how well is your brother doing?', 'how well is your sister doing?' We were inculcated with this notion from a pretty early age about the importance of it. P [city] happens to have grammar schools, it did in those days and in fact it still does, rather like M [city].*

*So it wouldn't have been acceptable to fail the 11+ so I went to the boys' grammar school. For one year that was actually just one bus journey because it was located in the town centre, but it had a brand new school .... So that was a significant journey although at the time I really didn't think of it as such. I just accepted it as part of the price of going to this brand new school out in the sticks almost. So then it was a case of O levels and A levels and I went to university in S [city].*

So coming from a family where education was ‘terribly important’ and an assumption that the 11+ would be passed, Kevin moves through his secondary education, into HE and becomes a teacher.

Jana also had a family who assumed she would go to a grammar school. She went to an ‘absolutely brilliant’ girls school where:

*They encouraged us, even though it was a long time ago, all to go to university and so about 30 of us probably went to university out of each year.*

*So you weren’t encouraged to go to secretarial school?*

*No; if you weren’t doing too well at school they might have encouraged that, and if you were sort of in-between it was teacher training college. One of the girls went to teacher training college but the rest of us went to university and two of them went to Oxford.*

Jana went onto medical school (as one of eight woman in a class of 80) where ‘men used to put you down and leave you out and make nasty remarks at you. We were all told we went to do medicine to find a husband, in fact I think we all worked all our lives, it was very, very derogatory and sexist’. The importance of Jana’s grammar school in supporting the aspirations of the female students is evident here as is the relative status of career options for women at the time; secretarial work if you ‘weren’t doing too well at school’, with teaching as an ‘in-between’ route. Here again we see the significance of dominant gendered expectations in that even the ‘choices’ of girls who had more educational opportunities were influenced and judged by, the expected norms of marriage and motherhood and by views of appropriate ‘women’s work’ (Marchbank and Letherby, 2014).

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

We acknowledge that the study reported here was small and the distribution of the participant group skewed with a greater proportion of women and of professional people than would be representative of the general population. There is also a higher percentage of grammar school students in the group (67%) than would be representative of general school age population in this period (25%).

The vision of the Education Act of 1944, included an education system ‘fit for the modern world’, a system with different schools to accommodate different student aptitudes. After the segregation by class in education systems of preceding generations, there was a hope for a system that would deliver equity, opportunity and social mobility for all children.

In selective schooling, there are, by definition, winners and losers. Our study confirms the certainty of very restricted opportunities for the losers (the vast majority of children in this 1940’-1960’s period), those who ‘failed’ the 11+. It also shows the consequences for the ‘winners’, those who ‘passed’ the 11+ and went to grammar schools, being mediated by intersecting social factors that for some, had perhaps a far greater impact on their lives than their schooling. There were few clear working class ‘escape stories’ such as those alluded to by Seabrook (1973) and Steedman (1986) for example; perhaps Barry’s story of a council house boy going to grammar school is the closest we get.

There was some talk of school in these narratives but little of teachers and the role they played in the lifelong education journeys of these participants. Some reference was made to the agentic role of primary teachers in the secondary school selection process but in this study, the ‘spaces of selfhood’ (Brewer, 2005) in the context of *lifelong* education journeys are associated primarily with the personal sphere of family and their social circumstances. The public issue of

selection in education is understood and enacted through memories of the participants' families and their social contexts rather than factors in school.

Stories of individual successes of those given access to the new grammar school opportunities provided by post-war developments, have become part of British cultural 'folklore' and the politics of nostalgia (McCulloch, 1994). We argue that the 'partial perspective' (Haraway, 1988) of these stories of success and 'escape' have become associated with 'universal truths' used in contemporary debates about selective schooling and social mobility. Our study shows that the picture of the impact of a grammar school education was much more nuanced and complicated than that.

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## 8. DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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**Table 1. Summary of the 18 narratives**

| Cluster | Schooling                  | Post 16           | Post 18        |
|---------|----------------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| 1       |                            |                   |                |
| Rachel  | Primary, Secondary Modern  | Work              | Work, HE later |
| Bert    | Primary, Secondary Modern  | Work              | Work           |
| Barbara | Primary, Secondary Modern  | Technical College | Work           |
| 2       |                            |                   |                |
| Dennis  | Primary, Technical         | Apprentice ship   | Work, HE later |
| Nigel   | Primary (private), Grammar | Technical College | Work, HE later |
| Barry   | Primary, Grammar           | Apprentice ship   | Work           |
| 3       |                            |                   |                |
| Brenda  | Primary, Grammar           | Work              | Work           |
| Miranda | Primary, Grammar           | Work              | Work, HE later |

|         |   |                      |                |
|---------|---|----------------------|----------------|
| Tracy   | Primary, Grammar                        | A levels/<br>Grammar | Work, HE later |
| Jasmine |   | Work                 | Work           |
| 4       |   |                      |                |
| Alan    | Primary, Grammar                        | Highers/<br>Grammar  | University     |
| Janine  | Primary, Grammar                        | A levels/<br>Grammar | University     |
| Kevin   | Primary, Grammar                        | A levels/<br>Grammar | University     |
| Jemima  | Primary (more than one),<br>Grammar     | A levels/<br>Grammar | University     |
| Doreen  | Primary (private and state),<br>Grammar | A levels/<br>Grammar | University     |
| Jana    | Yes (state and private)<br>evacuated    | A levels/<br>Grammar | University     |
| 5       |   |                      |                |
| Carl    | Home schooled, private<br>(post 11)     | A levels/<br>Private | University     |
| Jane    | Private (throughout)                    | Work                 | Work           |

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<sup>1</sup> There have been changes to government jurisdictions in the United Kingdom since 1944. With devolution, the four nations of Great Britain now have separate education systems. This study was done in England; contemporary scenarios will be given the locator, historical ones Britain

<sup>2</sup> The government evacuated children, mothers with infants and the infirm from British towns and cities during the Second World War. They were moved temporarily from their homes to places considered safer.